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# Theory

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## A Critique

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# Social Theory; a Critique

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Abstract.

*The very word Theory is an enigma and has been a cause of great debate and discussions. This paper critically analyses the very concept of Theory and puts forward the arguments that, it is because of dual meaning in the natural and social sciences which are the main and cardinal points of debate. Paper highlights the historical progress of social sciences and efforts to make it more scientific and empirical. It concludes with the proposition that, theory is being use indiscriminately in scholarly world and has to a graet extent replace the concept of philosophy.*

## Introduction

No other word has caused and is still causing more epistemological dissonance than the word Theory. Etymologically theory is derived from the Greek word ‘to look at’ ‘to watch’<sup>1</sup>. Late 16th century (denoting a mental scheme of something to be done): via late Latin from Greek theōria ‘contemplation, speculation’, from theōros ‘spectator’.<sup>2</sup>

Cambridge English Dictionary describes Theory as. *A formal statement of the rules on which a subject of study is based or of ideas that are suggested to explain a fact or event or, more generally, an opinion or explanation.*<sup>3</sup> Merriam Webster dictionary gives following meanings. *A plausible or scientifically acceptable general principle or body of principles offered to explain phenomena. A belief, policy, or procedure proposed or followed as the basis of action. An ideal or hypothetical set of facts, principles, or circumstances —often used in the phrase in theory. A hypothesis assumed for the sake of argument or investigation an unproved assumption : conjecture. A body of theorems presenting a concise systematic view of a subject the general or abstract principles of a body of fact, a science, or an art. Abstract thought : speculation*<sup>4</sup>

From the above definitions it is clear that there is no precise meaning of the word as compare to any physical object like chair, thus Theory as a word falls in the realm of mind and rather than as an science it is an art; had it been a science it would have been very specific; therefore theory is not a fact but a supposition.<sup>5</sup> All imaginations are rooted in our

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<sup>1</sup> Abdul A Said ed, *Theory of international Relations, the Crisi of relevance* {parentehall, NJ, 1968, p-43.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.lexico.com/definition/theory>

<sup>3</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/theory>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theory>

<sup>5</sup> Hans Joans, Wolfgang Knobl, tr.” What is a Theory” *Social Theory Twenty Introductory Lectures* <https://www.cambridge.org/pk/academic/subjects/sociology/social-theory/social-theory-twenty-introductory-lectures?format=AR> also see Jon Nixon *What is a Theory ?* University of Sheffield. Educator 34,2004 .Pp,27-37.also see Karl E. Weick , “What Theory is Not, Theorizing Is” in *Administrative Science*

brain from our experiences, before analysing theory objectively, it is pertinent to give an subjective experience with word theory. 'Theory' is one of the most important words in the lexicon of contemporary sociology. Yet, their ubiquity notwithstanding, it is quite unclear what sociologists mean by the words 'theory,' 'theoretical,' and 'theorize.'<sup>6</sup>

In everyday life the word **Hypothesis** is taken in the same sense as word Theory but it expresses a mental state of truth which is yet to become a theory thus it is a **Hypothesis**.

*An assumption or concession made for the sake of argument. an interpretation of a practical situation or condition taken as the ground for action. a tentative assumption made in order to draw out and test its logical or empirical consequences. the antecedent clause of a conditional statement*<sup>7</sup>

Thus Hypothesis and Theory differ in intensity of truth and this is how the Scientific Model works, where theories and hypothesis are operating in a circle of intellect and being proven in the identical laboratories. However the same connotation of theory cannot be observed in the social science where ideas and assumptions largely remain confined to the unconformity and as such remain hypothesis.<sup>8</sup>

## Logos and Semiotics

The world in which we are living has certain rules, the one fundamental is the 'language', the way we communicate with each other. The very origin of our human race is still shrouded in mystery, we are not sure as how this world took birth, how we human beings evolve, how our present rituals and customs took birth. We rely upon the written material, which has been passed over to us. Among this material the Greek have contributed more than others. Thus our modern day scholarly works rely heavily upon the Greek language, followed by Latin and English. In order to understand the debate on Theory, Hypothesis, Laws, Philosophy, Ideas; it is pertinent to have a brief understanding of rise and fall of these cultures and languages.

Our present knowledge and imagination dates back empirically to the River Nile civilisation as we found the Pyramids, in other civilisations like Moen Jo Dharo, Harrappa all within Indus Valley, the Euphrates, River Yellow; thus our imagination and physical evidence restricts our ideas of civilisation to these places. On the other hand geologically there are empirical facts like Mount Everest, K-2, Pamirs, Himalayas which dates back much before the Pyramids and Great Wall. There are lakes like Caspian Sea which is the largest fresh water lake in world. Biology tells us about the internal living system of humans and other living being and there has been no difference in the body anatomy of present day humans and those living or whose skeletons we have discovered.

Thus the very first act and principle in imagination is to have a startline in history around which all assumptions are constructed. That is why the present scholarly world is divided into different fields of science, arts, humanities. Each field by now has gone through certain phases, the old or the founding fathers ideas have been proven correct or incorrect by

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Quarterly, Sep., 1995, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Sep., 1995), pp. 385-390.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2393789>

<sup>6</sup> Gabriel Abend *The Meaning of Theory* Sociological Theory 26; 2 June 2008.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hypothesis>

<sup>8</sup> Carl Hempel *Philosophy of Natural Sciences* (Princeton University, 1966), pp.193-209

generations through research and also by giving proof of their discoveries. Before Galileo in 15<sup>th</sup> century the human kind never thought that it is not the sun which is revolving around us but it earth which is subservient to sun. It was not merely a mathematical assumption but it had deep impact on mankind thinking process, all of a sudden the entire myth of human superiority in the heaven was collapsed. Newton in 16<sup>th</sup> century found the reason as why apple always falls to earth . Both Galileo and Newton did not had to physically proof their discovery but confirmed it through mathematics or figures.

### **The aim of this paper is to find the meaning and application of word Theory in Social Science.**

Our philosophy starts with the Greeks. The Greek Empire or city states were in power between 600-200 BC, during this period they produced some of the basic works on philosophy. Men like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, Archimedes, Herodotus, Homer; wrote extensively on almost everything ranging from poetry to mathematics. Greeks learnt geometry from Egyptians and the pyramids being the empirical proof of geometry and geometry itself is not but a utility of figures for mankind. However it is the philosophical works that has survived and written mainly by Plato and Aristotle. We call them universally as philosophers and their way of thinking as philosophy. The Greeks believed in many gods and they treated these gods as living; they fight among themselves , they also have favourites therefore Greek philosophy has to be seen in this perspective also. Greek philosophers , Socrates stressed on morality, Plato on how society should live as in his Republic and his pupil Aristotle not only wrote Politics but also introduced Logic as a form of assessing the truth. Parallel to Greek philosophy we also have Chinese or Confucius philosophy , which stresses on the conservatism, the relationship between the individuals, the state, authority, family. Thus there is a difference in approach to these two nations. In Indus Civilisation Gutam Buddha in 500 BC went through a personal experience to understand the nature of pain and the life, this was start of a new philosophy.

Philosophy. *philosophia*, literally "love of wisdom".<sup>9</sup> philosophy: (n.) 1. a belief (or system of beliefs) accepted as authoritative by some group or school; doctrine; philosophical system; school of thought; ism; 2. the rational investigation of questions about existence and knowledge and ethics; 3. any personal belief about how to live or how to deal with a situation; "self-indulgence was his only philosophy"; "my father's philosophy of child-rearing was to let mother do it";

From 500 BC – 700 AD the world witnessed changes, there were wars of conquest like Alexander the Great, the rise of Roman Empire, fall of Greek and Persians and also the birth of Christianity and Islam. Thus the pattern of society and civilisation changed from previous millennium, yet critically they still retained the same structure. Men were still slaves, there was violence, society was still following the norms of a ‘family’ and tribe. Christianity was an extension of Judaism and Islam in 600 AD was also based upon Judaism on fundamental principle of Oneness of creature and his commandments, in which Islam is the end and therefore all other have to submit to Islam in one way or the other. This period also marks the end of Greek or Classical Philosophy.

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There were few books which survived from that era, they are travelogues and histories. Roman emperors like Caesar wrote commentaries on war, Greeks wrote about Alexander's campaigns and also about wars and campaigns on Greek islands. Apart from books the inscriptions on mountains and erections like Ashoka are reflections of past philosophy, Ashoka renounced violence in any and every form

1000-1500 AD. In this period the power shifted from Mediterranean Sea to Caspian Sea, from deserts of Arabia to highlands of Central Asia. Mongols wrote laws, collected their history and preserved it. They gave treatises on politics and government in line with their geography and history. It is in this period that scientific inventions like printing press, paper, gun powder In Europe the Copernicus and Galileo came out with their theories., Western Europe by and large remained safe from the Mongols and Mughuls yet it was embroiled within itself over the religious issues ranging from Crusades to Protestants .

1500- 2000 AD, period is the most exciting, thrilling and devastating in our mankind history. Science took a decisive lead over the philosophy.

Auguste Comte a French philosopher 1790s among the philosophers stands out as one who studied science with an aim to improve mankind in general, by drawing inference from society , politics and history the similar lessons that are being accepted from natural science. Comte's writings highlights the logical assumption that there are similar and recurring patterns in human lives also and by adopting scientific method we can understand our environment in a better manner.

## **Part II- Sociology**

Thus the birth of sociology took place as a subject, the study of society in a scientific pattern, the main difference from past philosophy is that whereas a philosopher does not have to prove his ideas into an empirical manner, also in sociology the language was changed from words to figures because in science the language is figures or mathematics.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century the scholarly works were represented using both figures and words, also the importance of philosophy was highlighted through Karl Marx works in which he analyses the society on a historical pattern but within the history instead of focussing on mere wars and kings he gave the propositions of class conflict among the society and blamed capitalism or accumulation of wealth as the main cause.

Emile Durkheim in line with Comte's principals of sociology carried out study of suicides in one district of Paris and found similarity in pattern among the suicides. Darwin in scientific research came out with a pattern of human evolution , Malthus in his study of human population and food gave the findings that food insecurity will increase as population growth will overtake it. Yet sociologist failed to predict wars and revolutions although as a sociologist they were expected to do so. The fundamental reason is that human are unpredictable and there is no one single model which can be replicated to understand such mega events. The micro level phenomenon can be experimented as Emperor Akbar did in 1590 to find out whether a human child has this language as a Priori or not, he confirmed it with a model of over 100 new born babies that human child learns language only through interaction.

In post WWI , the world witnessed an unprecedented human massacre for no visible reason . By 1914-1918 the world had entered and matured into modernisation and industrialisation , there were universities in almost every capital of the world and many countries had over hundreds of them, newspaper and journals were being printed daily and along with radio and printed books the globe had been reduced to a city if not to a village. Colonialism and Imperialism had taken over the empires of past and new form of human slave yaws visible in which the entire nations were at the mercy of few individuals sitting at the crown. The structure of the world remains the same as it was under Pharaohs

Critical Theory thus developed at this time , it was a philosophy to analyse the world around and in the distant past from a new perspective of own rather than from the given narrative. The Frankfurt and Vienna Schools emerged. In the Europe the intellectual power was shifted from Britain and France to Germany, it seems more powerful a nation becomes more outspoken its intellectuals becomes. Nietzsche, Hegel and later Max Weber expressed themselves about the world. Hegel gave a philosophy of history and Weber explained the society in terms of structures .

Psychology emerged as a science at the beginning of last century and it is this particular branch of social science, the study of human which can be justified with bringing theories regarding human emotions and inner and hidden feelings.<sup>10</sup> Freud and Karl Jung achieved this through a laborious, time consuming interaction comprising of interviews spread over weeks and months with meticulous record keeping of data and its analysis. In short a masterpiece in sociology after Emperor Akbar. Thus the concept of hypothesis and theories became more vocal, Freud's theories were based upon data and it was his analysis based upon scientific method which classify his findings as theories. One adverse effect of Freud and Jung was that it gave an impetus to other social sciences branches to come up with similar theories.<sup>11</sup>

**Post Modernism.** What ever was left of humanity in WWI was surely buried when USA dropped two atomic bombs on successive nights over innocent Japanese civilians including sick and pregnant woman, unprecedented barbarity and yet there was no protest rather rejoice and joy among the philosophers and theorists across the globe such was the death of modernity.

From the ashes of WWII rose USA as a superpower of intellect, almost all intellects from war torn Europe had either migrated or were offered to join the USA Universities. In this atmosphere of anti Communism , these philosophers and social scientist tried to make the best use of their knowledge. They were hired by the governments and public foundations to find the answers to curb communism . Theory as a paradigm emerged in post WWII in USA,<sup>12</sup> where the word was used freely , first as a synonym of philosophy and then as a substitute for scientific reasoning; yet the word Theory as expressed in natural sciences was never or seldom observed in the literature published in this era of Cold War. Mathematical figures became important because from figures one can draw further mathematical equations.

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<sup>10</sup> Arthur James Todd *Theories of Social Progress* (NY. Macmillan, 1918)pp.407-414

<sup>11</sup> Noel Parker, Stuart Sinn *The A-Z Guide to Modern Social and Political Theorists* (London: Prentice Hall, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Norbert Wiley "The Rise and Fall of Dominating Theories in American Sociology" William Snizk, Ellisana Fichrman, Micheal Miller, ed, in *Contemporary issues in Sociology* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979)

Compressing human lives in terms of figures may sound odd but in certain scenarios these figures do help city and urban developers to plan for future

### **Part III- Role of Theory in Social Science Academic Research**

From the preceding parts it is hopefully quite obvious that there is no standard definition of Theory, it is a concept, a general description of the phenomenon, and more than often the etymology of hypothesis and theory is overlapping. Theory academically as taught in Area Study Centre Peshawar University is treated as a scientific entity, it is supposed to have an assumption or a fact, it should be based upon logical rationale, it must have a boundary that is in terms of time or geography. It is also stressed that before theory there is art of theorising which as a matter of fact falls in the realm of philosophy. Thus theory is a mathematical representation of the philosophical idea, an epistemological representation of the ontological assumptions.

In social science the concept of theory is different from natural sciences and the major confusion arises because of this dual use of the word or logo theory in both sciences. Therefore first and foremost a scholar must declare the type of theory he is stating i.e., natural or social theory.

As stated earlier, the structure of our society or civilisation is by and large uniform despite passage of five –seven millenniums,<sup>13</sup> this brings the very first assumption of social theory that there is **Structure** in our society. The other aspect of this social theory is the **Behaviour** of the individuals. The ever change in the society whether slow or rapid yet changing. This change in society is often brought by external events like famine, invasion, invention like television or telegraph before it. The aeroplane and its impact on society. There are certain facets of the civilisation like war which seems to be ever present, the violence and the charity; therefore within a society the pattern of life are similar to animal world which is around us. The concept of family the children and the care for them by both the humans and by the animals.<sup>14</sup>

In modern research, the essence is on its validity and reliability, only then a research can be truly classified as scientific in nature for social science. Thus theory plays an important role in this field. A Theory is thus a guide from history if one is applying the work of the past to understand the present. In other manner, one can understand an act of past by looking at it from modern theoretical perspective.

### **Conclusion.**

The debate over the word and concept Theory is still raging on among the scholars, the difference between philosophy and theory is very sublime, theory as a matter of fact is the scientific representation of a philosophical idea. In social science the choice between the concept of hypothesis and theory is also very minimum. Scholars across the globe are using the word theory for many ideas which by and large are still hypothesis.

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Burke *History and Social Theory* (Cornhill university Press, 1993)pp.44-58

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Giddens *Social Theory and Modern Sociology* (Stanford University Press, 1987),pp.52-73.